

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Col. Burt Thompson, commander, First Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-N, January 12, 2009.

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of defense for Public Affairs): Thank you for joining us this evening and good morning to the press corps. It is my privilege to be able to introduce to you Colonel Burt Thompson, who is the commander of the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, multi-division north (sic).

Colonel Thompson assumed his current duties in Iraq in September of 2008, and this is his first opportunity since taking those responsibilities in Iraq to be able to join us in this format. So we appreciate it. He is joining us from Forward Operating Base Warhorse in Diyala province, Iraq, and has been brought up to speed with our format here, so he's going to kind of give you an overview of what his unit's doing, and then take some of your questions.

So Colonel, again, thank you for joining us this evening and I'll turn it over to you.

COL. THOMPSON: Okay. Thank you very much for the introduction. What I'd like to do is just start off with some brief comments here. First of all, on behalf of the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen and Marines here at FOB Warhorse in Diyala province, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you and wish all of you a happy new year's, happy 2009.

What I'd like to do is just present, again, five minutes' worth of comments here and then open it up for questions and answers and give you the majority of the time.

Just a little bit about how we got here -- 22 months in Fort Wainwright, Alaska; we had 22 months' worth of dwell time in preparation for our deployment to Diyala province in Iraq. About six months into it, we realized we were coming to Diyala, so we immediately started looking at Diyala. At that time, we had 4-2 Stryker here and then 2 SCR -- Stryker Cavalry Regiment after them. Intel, overwatch and backstop in constant dialogue with them to kind of enter at a higher level once we got here to Diyala.

So 22 months of dwell time. We've been here -- I got on the ground about the 3rd of October; our relief in place and transitional authority was on the 27th of October -- so about 60 days, and it's been extremely busy since then. We conducted a relief in place with the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment from Vilseck, Germany, and then we immediately transitioned into operations in Diyala province. And we quickly attempted to establish and did establish relationships with governance, our Iraqi security forces partners, to include the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, and our adjacent units to Diyala -- within the Diyala province.

We quickly learned that Diyala province was a very unique province in many ways. It had 1.2 million people, as far as population. Two largest towns: Baqubah, which

-- we're located just outside of Baqubah, to the north-northeast of -- about 500,000 in population; second-biggest city, Muqdadia, 200,000.

The terrain here's as kind of diversified as the people. To the southern portion of Diyala, flat plains, a lot of desert, mostly agrarian. As you move farther up north, closer to the Kurd land, and to the east, which is the Iranian border, mountainous and rolling- plains-type region. So we've got very diverse terrain here in Diyala.

It is primarily agricultural-based, and we've been assisting in a lot of ways with agriculture, drip irrigation and other projects, which we can talk about. It does have some industrial enterprises here. Predominantly, they have textile and electronic-component facilities.

Diyala has been struggling with a little bit of unemployment: depending on who you listen to, between 50 and 80 percent unemployment rates. And I see that increasing, as far as job opportunity here, over the last 60 to 90 days.

I'll talk a little bit about the campaign plan. Since we arrived here, our primary effort was to maintain and establish security, a safe and secure environment. That's our critical enabler here in Diyala province. Governance is the primary line of effort for us here in Diyala, working closely with Governor Rah from the Diyala governance here and the provisional council. So we spend a lot of time -- as a matter of fact, my deputy commander is the primary-line- of-effort lead for the brigade in Diyala province.

Next to that is essential services, reestablishment of and continuation of essential services in Diyala, on behalf of 1.2 million. And then close to that is economics, helping Diyala province spend three years' worth of budget. And we're working down the list of projects there that they could spend money on.

The brigade basically has been partnering with the ISF security forces, Iraqi security forces, the army and police, for the past 60 days. There's four areas I'll highlight real quickly for you, and I'm sure you'll have some interesting questions then.

First, partnership -- partnership with the government of Iraq and Iraqi security forces. We've done numerous reconciliation meetings -- tribal reconciliation -- trying to make up for hostile parties opposing each other, for the, you know, past five to six years in Diyala province. We've been working tribal reconciliation hard, senior leaders and leader engagements with the governance, with Iraqi army counterparts at all levels, and then combined planning meetings that we've been doing with them.

Sons of Iraq transition is the second area I'll talk to you about. Huge effort in registration of Sons of Iraq. We have nine thousand and twenty -- or 9,062 in Diyala province. We've registered those and are now in the process of transitioning them to the government of Iraq. And I'd be willing to talk about that and the ceremony we conducted on 4 January when we transitioned those over to the government of Iraq control.

Thirdly, on SOFA and the security agreement, we anticipated the SOFA here in Diyala. We continued to work those issues prior to SOFA being signed. So when 1 January arrived, we didn't have any anxieties about the SOFA and working with our partners here in Diyala.

We saw and I see the SOFA not as a limitation or a constraint, but as an opportunity to work with the Iraqi counterparts. And that's the way we view it, as an opportunity. And we're leveraging that as an opportunity.

The COP closures: That's another part of the security agreement. That is combat outposts and foreign operating bases. Those that are in built-up areas, there are some of those that will eventually be closed, and I'd be willing to talk about COPs and the closure of those.

And then of course, the question of -- I always get asked about early pullout from Diyala province from Iraq. And I wouldn't speak for Iraq, but certainly I could speak for Diyala and where we're going with that and our way ahead.

And then finally, elections, which is where we spend the majority of our energy right now, as you can imagine, getting ready for the 31 January elections. Done some very detailed planning and coordination meetings with not just the Iraqi security forces, but with the provincial government authorities and the council here. We've done combined planning efforts and we've made a lot of progress in that area.

This week we're doing our rehearsal with Iraqi security force counterparts, with the Iraqi provisional governance and overwatch of that. And then we'll also back-brief a trilateral committee that was formed by the government of Iraq, to give them the status of how we intend to do elections in Diyala province writ large, but most importantly in the disputed areas to the north of Diyala province. And I can talk about that.

The key to all this and the key to the success of the elections is making sure that, one, we seat the new governance. So as soon as the elections are over, about a two-month period of time where we've got to properly seat this new governance in Diyala province and then continue to partner with them and move ahead.

That's kind of my opening comments there, just kind of a few items I'm sure you'd like to talk about. So what I'll do now, if you don't mind, is to open it up for any questions that you might have.

MR. WHITMAN: Thanks, Colonel. We do have some, and we'll start with Andrew.

Q Colonel, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. Could you talk a bit about the security environment in general in Diyala? How many security incidents are you seeing on a daily or a weekly basis? Who's responsible for them, and who are the targets?

COL. THOMPSON: Yes, sir, I can. Andrew, thanks for the question. When we first got here -- and I'll just preface this with transitions. Probably the most dangerous time here in Diyala is when units are transitioning out.

When you've got 4,500 soldiers transitioning, with another 4,200 soldiers coming into a province, you always see a spike in violence then. And usually they're testing the inbound unit and quite frankly the outbound unit on their tactics, techniques, procedures, to see how committed they are, to see how they're going to do security within the province.

So we did see a spike. As a matter of fact, just before we did our transition of authority, on the 16th of October, we had 107- millimeter rockets fired on Forward Operating Base Warhorse. That resulted in two deaths, two killed in action of our soldiers. And we had nine wounded in action as a result of that. And then it got quiet in Diyala province for a period of time for about 30 days.

But what we do see is pretty routinely the improvised explosive devices. Generally speaking those are drop-and-pop, homemade type explosives, where they'll be set down in a market area. They'll walk away. It will be on some type of a timer. And it will explode.

Generally Andrew, what you see with those are in built-up areas. Baqubah, which is the largest city here in Diyala, generally speaking is the target; the market areas there.

Right now most of the targeting that we see are against civilians, believe it or not, here in Baqubah, Muqdadiyah and some of the other cities. You still will see IEDs along roadsides. Some of those will be deep-buried mines along some of the rural road.

But generally speaking, within the built-up areas, the target is the civilian populace obviously to sway the hearts and minds of those who live here in Diyala province.

About every week, there's some type of an incident. Not all those incidents result in death or damage. Some of those, the Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi police and army specifically, and coalition forces partnering with them will find some of these IEDs. And we'll send our explosive ordnance disposal teams in to neutralize those.

Q Who do you think is responsible for those attacks?

COL. THOMPSON: Obviously there's still an al Qaeda presence here in Diyala province. There has been for a while. Again that is the primary, we think, the primary means. We do see use of, for example, Iranian mines from the Iran-Iraq War being used. And I would suspect, and we have anticipated, that there's a criminal aspect of this too.

If you could buy a Russian mine for \$200 and sell it to anybody you can, on the market, regardless of who, whether it's Shi'a, Sunni, whether it's al Qaeda, Jaish al-Mahdi or any of the special groups, they'll sell those. And then you'll see those pop up in some of the remote areas, some of the rural areas and roads, and then sometimes taking the material inside those mines and making homemade explosive device.

So we have seen both al Qaeda and we've seen Jaish al-Mahdi, JAM special groups, and then a criminal aspect of this as well.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney, go ahead.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. Can you give us your assessment of the strength of -- hi -- of the strength of al Qaeda in Diyala? And then if it's possible, to talk a little bit about their numbers. Are you seeing them increase in number or decrease in your time there? And then along those same lines, the security environment, specifically along the border with Iran, if you're seeing an increase, a decrease, of movement across the border?

COL. THOMPSON: Okay, Courtney. Thank you. That's a good question.

When we first got to Diyala, as I mentioned, we had an initial spike, obviously, during the transition period, and then we saw it level out. Right now, depending on where you're talking about in Diyala province, we anticipate up near the (Hamrin) region -- which is the northern part, near the Kurdish area -- there's a cell up there that we've been dealing with, and that's predominantly al Qaeda. And the gross numbers, they're anywhere from 20 to 30.

Down south, towards Baqubah itself, we're seeing Baqubah in many ways as having a support zone of al Qaeda or al Qaeda-associated networks that are operating in and around. There's an area now just south-southeast of Baqubah, which is called Balad Ruz. And Balad Ruz is really -- if you wanted to consider a bastion of defense that remains in Diyala province, that's probably the last bastion of al Qaeda defense there. And they've got a support network and zone there that we anticipate are up to a hundred, approximately a hundred.

But again, these guys do not come out and face us in an open battle. They obviously hide. They do not face us one on one. They primarily use IEDs, as you've seen and you've seen other provinces within Diyala.

So there has not been an increase. We do anticipate there will be an increase in some violence here in support of the elections and influencing the elections, and that's why we're putting so much emphasis on, one, planning for the elections, two, establishing a proper security, but really, we are doing that by, with and through the Iraqi security

forces and our counterparts there. So, planning and preparation will prevent a lot of those violent acts from occurring.

As far as the last part of your question, about the Iranian border, we do suspect that there is across-border movement along the Iranian border. We share a good portion of the Iranian border through Diyala province here, from our north down to the south-southeast. It has been busy. We do conduct operations along the border, in conjunction with the Iraqi border defense element that's there, the DBE. That's a brigade-size Iraqi element that operates what's called forts along the Iranian border.

And we work with those partners. And of course, we've got aviation assets, air weapons teams, scout weapons teams. And I've had my 5-1 Cav Squadron that is along the east, and they operate in security zones along the east, looking for primarily cross-border operations.

And I could tell you, Courtney, what we are seeing is really a criminal aspect, not necessarily large caravans of equipment or freedom fighters or anything else coming across the border. A lot of this is stuff that's been going on for thousands of years -- smuggling, movements via donkeys into certain regions of Diyala.

And we also have indications of -- again, like I mentioned earlier -- a criminal aspect, where folks will go harvest some of the mines from the Iran-Iraq war, move those to the west towards Baqubah, sell them to the highest bidder.

And again, that's the criminal aspect there.

Q And if I could just follow up on one thing you said about the -- you expect an increase in violence around the election. Is that based on any specific intelligence, chatter that you're hearing, or is it just based on the previous elections -- there being a bump in violence?

COL. THOMPSON: Ma'am, I'll tell you, the best source of intelligence for us, to be quite honest with you, Courtney, is the Iraqi security force partners that we have. They're out there every day, just like we are, day in, day out, picking up on atmospherics, talking to folks. And quite frankly, the Sons of Iraq, the concerned local citizens that everybody's familiar with, that we've transitioned to governance of Iraq as far as oversight and pay, they are of great value to us. And I think the human intelligence portion of this, the individuals that you talk to on the street are the greatest values, because quite frankly, most of the folks in Diyala province -- and I can speak for many, many, many of these citizens -- they want peace, they want stability, they want to move ahead, they want to get this behind them.

You know, in many ways with the election, the 2005 election, that was to prove that, hey, I've got some ink on my finger, and we can actually do this election. The 2009 elections are a little bit different, and I'm taking a different view of the 2009 elections. This is no kidding, an opportunity to seat governance. In that governance there's a critical

period in the history of Iraq, certainly the history of Diyala, to move this place forward, to continue the growth, to continue the stability and prosperity that we're starting to see now in Diyala province.

Q So there is human intelligence that's telling you that there's -- there will be an expected increase in violence around the elections, then?

COL. THOMPSON: Yes, we consider that the period of the elections -- and I think historically speaking, you look at 2005, you saw spikes there -- I think, historically speaking, and I think from -- really a most dangerous course of action for us is to anticipate an increase in some type of violent activities around the elections. And it's pretty clear what they'd be going after. It's to sway the hearts and the minds, to intimidate those civilians from going and voting.

The Iraqi security forces have an extremely detailed plan for, one, securing the polling sites, securing the routes to and from those polling sites, and then the ballots. We're putting a lot of emphasis on security of the ballots, transfer of those ballots and then maintaining accountability and responsibility through the entire process of the elections.

So we're going to mitigate, obviously, everything we possibly can as far as threats to the elections, just like we do every day, day in, in Diyala.

Al Qaeda, the enemy, the opponent, obviously, has a vote.

And he will look for those critical vulnerabilities, if he can find them, and he'll try to exploit those. Our job is to prevent that from happening.

Again, it's a unique relationship we have with Iraqi partners here. The Iraqi police is the inner cordon, so to speak, with these voting sites and locations. Iraqi army supports that, and we're -- we are an outer layer of that, to observe, to assist any way that we can with the security, quick-reaction forces, take all the technologies that we have available, kind of overwatch these sites and provide a safe and secure election.

MR. WHITMAN: Mike?

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. You were just talking about the Iraqi security forces. Maybe you can talk a bit about how you think their capabilities are right now, maybe since your arrival or just before the arrival, and how you're looking at them now and, as you just talked about, into the elections. Are you also backing off a bit on patrols, or -- and do they have the lead on those? Maybe just kind of talk a bit about how that's working in your AOR.

COL. THOMPSON: I mentioned earlier that we went to school in -- on Diyala province before getting here. And I dialogued with two brigade commanders prior to getting here that spent, collectively, a year's time here in Diyala. I had a good feel for,

one, the key leaders in the Iraqi security forces, specifically the army; not near as much the police, because they made some key changes to some of the key leaders in the police force.

So I felt pretty confident about the brigades in the 5th Iraqi Army Division, which is resident here in Diyala province. I felt good about the Diyala ops center commander, and also what we call the PDOP, their provisional director of police, General Damoukh, here. So I felt comfortable about their capabilities.

Obviously, as a commander, I spent the first 30 to 60 days pretty -- pretty much complete with my assessment of where they stand. And I think what you'll see is -- what I see is, individually, they're pretty competent. The equipment they've got, the kit that they have now, in many ways is just as good as some of ours.

Where you start seeing a little bit of a disparity is when they get to the collective -- a collective level, where we can do company combined arms live-fire exercises and operations here in Diyala, they can do those as well. But as far as integrating all instruments of power -- air weapons team, artillery, direct-fire weapons systems -- they got a ways to go there.

But again, the partnership, by, with and through, we spend a lot of time working with our partners. Every Iraqi battalion and brigade, all the way down to the squad and platoon level, has a partner. And those partners are from 1-25 Stryker Brigade. And so we've taken partnership serious. And quite frankly, we've raised it to a higher level.

You know, the SOFA and the security agreement says there are certain limitations for U.S. forces. I don't see it that way.

I see it as an opportunity not to get out there on point to clear these objectives, but to allow the Iraqis to get out front. And we partner with them, and we're brothers in arms, and we continue to move them forward. We take our tactics, techniques, procedures and our skill sets, and we rub up against them extremely hard. And the end result is we rub off on them.

And you can see their improvements every single day. My counterpart is Major General Khalid. He's the 5th Iraqi Army commander. And I can tell you, he has been working now for -- what? -- five-plus years with coalition forces, and you can't help not to have some goodness rub off on you. And so collectively, with the ability to integrate, to plan, to coordinate, to synchronize and efficiently and effectively execute operations, day by day they're improving.

So my assessment in the past 60 days is, yeah, they've got a ways to go, but quite frankly, you've got to understand that they've built this thing from scratch. They don't have the logistical systems we have, in many ways the technologies that we have,

although that's even getting better, with the majority of our forces getting some of the same weapons systems that we have here in Diyala.

The Iraqi police. The Iraqi police, a little bit slower to get it professionalized; certainly have got the kit and equipment and they look professional, but you know, teaching them, again, the rule of law, order, justice, fairness -- all that stuff is a continuous process. And they're improving every single day.

Quite frankly, the Iraqi security forces, both the army and police, they have a herculean effort in front of them to maintain stability. And to me, that's the most important thing we can do. And the important gift I can give them is the ability to maintain a safe and secure environment here in Diyala. And that's what we've focused on an awful lot.

And that's everything from an individual soldier that can cook, to a rifleman, to a brigade commander that knows how to coordinate and integrate and synchronize combined-arm operations, and then most importantly, Iraqi army and Iraqi police working together, in unity. And again, day by day they're improving, everything from individual skills to collective skills to professionalism.

Q Can I ask a quick follow-up? This is probably not the best question, but with their level, are you confident that they are going to do a -- a good job during the election? I mean, you seem confident already, but do they have all the command, coordination, control in place to be able to pull off the security in the election without actually having to pull you guys in as well?

COL. THOMPSON: Yeah. And it's not a matter of pulling us in. To be honest with you, we want to be there. But we're transparent as we can possibly be.

We spent six hours yesterday with all the key players, to include those from the disputed zones up north, working through our security plan, painstaking detail.

In a couple of days here, we're going to do a full-up combined arms rehearsal where we'll bring and help facilitate and allow Iraqi counterparts to lead that rehearsal on the ground, just like a full-up rehearsal that we do in the Army: working through all the elements from movement of ballots to maintaining security of civilian population as they move through this processing of balloting; looking at physical security at each one of the polling sites or the voting sites, from the T-walls to the barrier materials, through the steps that we have to go through to, one, verify the individual, verify his identity, screen him to make sure he's not got any weapons or IEDs or anything else, and then moving those individuals -- to include female searchers, you know, to take into account the cultural differences here. So there will be a safe and secure election.

Again, al Qaeda and anybody opposing a safe and secure election has a vote in the process as well, as a voting member of this. But I can guarantee you one thing:

They've put a significant amount of effort into it, at least in Diyala. And maybe we're rubbing off on them, but I think they're confident that they're going to do this as well.

Won't be without challenge, certainly, but I'll guarantee you, it won't -- it won't happen as a result of a lack of attitude, a lack of desire and a lack of preparation.

We have the equipment they don't, in many ways, as far as redundancy and communications -- you know, overhead platforms to monitor this, quick reaction forces. And we'll make those available.

I think the biggest benefit out of this is this serves as a huge catalyst for them to properly plan the effort, coordinate it and synchronize it, because it's a herculean effort. When you've got a million and a half of the population and the number of polling sites that we have in Diyala -- then you have the disputed zone and some challenges you have there -- it's no easy task. But we're taking it day by day, part by part, and then we'll bring this together in our final rehearsal and final back-brief to the -- (inaudible) -- commission, get their final approvals for it, and we'll execute a safe and secure election here in Diyala on 31 January.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez at ABC. Question about the transition of the Sons of Iraq to Iraqi control: What are some of the challenges in building -- in trust-building between the Sons of Iraq in your AOR and the central government, since there seems to be a lot of conflicts, shall we say, in terms of opinions? And in terms of challenges, what are the risk factors if they should turn once again to their previous activities?

COL. THOMPSON: There -- I mean, there are many challenges. I think one of the first things we started doing, at least from my perspective in the commander's guidance I gave my subordinate commanders, is start the partnership early, establish relationships with the Sons of Iraq. Now, as we know, most of the Sons of Iraq are Sunni. We know that here in Diyala, the governance is primarily Shi'a.

So there are fears and there are concerns -- and we're watching this extremely closely -- that potentially the government of Iraq -- whether it be justified or directed by the government of Iraq or not is really kind of irrelevant -- but if they did decide to target or try to influence the vote for any of these elections, you know, they could potentially do it through the Sons of Iraq, which would be Sunni.

So we've watched that extremely carefully, obviously the sectarian piece of this. We also watched the tribal aspect of it and certainly, you know, the religious and political aspect of it as well.

So I mean, we're watching that very carefully. Primarily Sons of Iraq are Sunni. And then they have, no kidding, contributed in a significant way. That's undeniable, undeniable from the Iraqi security forces.

The DOC commander, Diyala Ops Center commander, as well as the PDOP, provisional director of police, will all tell you that they might not have been able to pull this off, as far as stabilizing Diyala, stabilizing Baqubah, until they could get good governance going, without Sons of Iraq.

And I have embraced the Sons of Iraq through a series of briefings, information briefings talking about how this transition would occur, with the Sons of Iraq, how the government would take ownership of them and then transition them to pay and then not to give up on them but to help provide them jobs, beyond the period of the Sons of Iraq transition.

And quite honestly we're doing a pretty good job. Will they turn? Listen, these folks have got to -- they've got to care for their families, got to feed their children. They've got to have a means of livelihood.

So they've got to work. And so I think from at least the provisional governor, Governor Ra'ad, and what I see here in Diyala province, they're committed to the cause. And obviously it will cost quite a bit of money if we end up paying the number of Sons of Iraq we have.

We have 9,062. And it was a Herculean effort to get those registered, with the appropriate identification, five forms, you know, five means of identity and all the other paperwork required. But I'll guarantee you one thing.

It wasn't coalition forces leading that effort. We were prodding that effort. But that was the Iraqi army pulling those guys in, because they were being paid primarily by coalition forces here. We paid through contractors who paid the subordinate Sons of Iraq.

When we do this here and we model this for the Iraqi army, next month, we'll pay and model it for them. But we're not paying contractors. We're paying individuals. Those individual soldiers get their money.

So there's some assurance right there that, hey, there's no middle man. I get my money. I can take care of my family and provide a livelihood for them.

So could they turn? Yes. If they turn, it will be because they're disenfranchised; the government has let them down, has not paid them the money that they've earned quite frankly.

So we watch that very careful. And there's a degree of accountability here. The government of Iraq said -- the prime minister said he will pay them, and he's committed to them. And what we've got to do is help hold them accountable.

How do I do that? One, I observe. Okay? Two, I report. When I see discrepancies in this process, I take it up to General Caslen, 25th Infantry Division; he takes it up to General Austin at Corps, all the way up to General Odierno. So there's a

process in place to observe what's going on and hold them accountable through reporting, and that's exactly what we do.

MR. WHITMAN: Anybody else? Laura?

Q Hi. It's Laura Jakes with the Associated Press. You'd mentioned at the top something about an early pullout for some of the troops stationed in your province. I'm new here, so if this is something that you talk about regularly, please excuse the question. But when are your guys planning on coming home, or are they going to Afghanistan? And is that on an earlier time table than what had been anticipated?

COL. THOMPSON: You know, it's kind of interesting how kind of rumors -- we call it rumor intelligence -- passes. I got a call from home not too long ago, and my wife said, hey, a lot of the ladies are saying that we're going to come home in June and we're going to take 30 days of leave in July and we're heading to Afghanistan in August. I can tell you, that's not happening.

We are committed to Diyala. We're here for a 12-month rotation. And again, we got here in October and the tour was -- the transitional authority was the 27th of October. We're fully committed. Diyala has had four brigade combat teams come through here in less than a 14- month period. We need to stay in Diyala, and we're going to stay in Diyala for our full rotation.

In many ways, we can affect conditions for the next phase of this operation. A new brigade will come in behind us, most likely. It might look a little bit different than we are, depending on the capabilities and the security situation here in Diyala. We'll set conditions for that success.

When we came in here, I didn't devise a 12-month campaign plan; I developed -- we developed an 18-month campaign to get us through that transition period of a new unit coming in and to take account for many opportunities here. There's a lot of challenges in Diyala, but there's a lot more opportunities than there are challenges: the Sons of Iraq transfer, and seating those; the elections that we have here; the SOFA. All that stuff really combined is providing some unique opportunities, and we've just to be smart enough, quite honestly, to leverage them.

So when do we go home? When the commander in chief tells us to go home. We hope it's just a 12-month, and that's what we've been told, but we're committed to the cause. There is no doubt the soldiers of the Arctic Wolves, day in, day out, are committed here. And quite frankly, none of us -- yeah, we'd love to be home. I mean, I tell my Iraqi counterparts this all the time. But I'm just committed -- I'm committed just as much, if not more in many ways, because when you spill blood here, it gives you the degree of commitment. These soldiers here in this brigade are committed to the cause here for Diyala.

And what makes it refreshing is, you have counterparts that act like they care, and they appreciate what you're doing.

On 16 October, when we had the indirect fire attacks that killed two of our soldiers, it would absolutely humble you to look at, one, the audience. On the front two rows were all of my counterparts. They didn't come because they had to; it was the Iraqi police, the Iraqi army commander, all our brigade -- subordinate brigade commanders and Iraqi counterparts. And I'm telling you, you rub up against them enough, you're going to rub off on them, and what's rubbing off on the Iraqis here is something that's good. We're teaching them the value of life -- you know, dignity, respect for others, rule of law. And quite frankly, day in, day out, the more we push and rub, the more is rubbing off on them. And it's going to take them time, but we are, one, quite proud of the progress that they're making, and we're not going to give up on them.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, with that, we have reached the end of our allocated time, and we do appreciate your indulgence, as we started a little late here. But before I bring it to a close, let me just turn it back to you, in case you have any final thoughts for us.

COL. THOMPSON: Thank you very much. I mean, I didn't mind waiting. I mean, the commander in chief was talking, and I work for him.

But I just -- I'd like to thank those back home in Fort Wainwright. And there's a lot of our families did not want to brave the cold winter, so they went home with family in the lower 48. But I'd just like to thank our families for their -- and friends -- for their prayers and support, especially during the holiday seasons here. And it's tough being away from home, but that's just part of the price of being a soldier. And we were committed, and we took good care of each other over here, and we had a wonderful holiday season, both Thanksgiving, Christmas. And then, quite frankly, 2009 was a busy 2009. So -- already. So we had a good New Year's as well. But just to thank the folks back home, thank y'all for your interest in what's going on here in Diyala.

And I can tell you, again, I'm very optimistic. We've made a huge difference. It's not without challenge, but on the other side of the challenge there's opportunity. And I see a lot of opportunities for this place.

And the governance of Iraq, the Iraqi counterparts here, as far as Iraqi army, Iraqi police, they know that the Arctic Wolves in this brigade is fully committed as partners. And I'm looking forward to the next nine or so months while we're here in Diyala. And again, I thank you guys very much, and just have an enjoyable rest of your day.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Colonel, and given that you do have a few more months there, we hope that we'll be able to do this again with you soon.

COL. THOMPSON: Okay. Any time. Thank you.

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